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US reported in secret bid for input on Nicaragua war

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WASHINGTON - The Reagan administration is making a secret diplomatic effort to solicit new suggestions from eight Latin American nations on how to approach a negotiated settlement of the civil war in Nicaragua, according to a senior official.

Letters from President Reagan to eight heads of state were passed by Secretary of State George P. Shultz in a Feb. 10 meeting here with the foreign ministers of Mexico, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Uruguay, the official disclosed.

The foreign ministers had requested a meeting with Shultz to urge, unsuccessfully, that the United States not request military aid for the antigovernment guerrillas known as contras and resume direct talks with the Nicaraguan government.

Instead they were handed letters from Reagan requesting new proposals on how a negotiated solution might have some chance of success. Harry Shlaudeman, the State Department's special envoy for Central America, is visiting each country to see what new suggestions may have developed, the official said.

"We're saying in effect, 'OK, you want us to negotiate a solution. How do you propose we do it?'" the official said. "God knows what new proposals may emerge from this."

On Tuesday the president sent Congress a request for \$70 million in military aid and \$30 million in nonlethal aid for the contras. US officials expect an uphill battle in trying to persuade the lawmakers to provide military aid.

The initiative with the eight Latin American nations most concerned about the Nicaraguan situation is presumably designed to demonstrate that the administration has not forsaken the diplomatic track entirely.

A senior US official told reporters at the White House Tuesday that "the only way to get [Nicaraguan leaders] to the bargaining table is to convince them they do not have the option of a military solution" against the contras. "You aren't going to do it with sweet talk."

Privately, officials concede the controversial request for overt military aid faces an uphill battle on Capitol Hill. Only if Reagan and Shultz make a very heavy lobbying effort does it stand a chance, they concede.

Analysts admit the contra military campaign has been disappointing in recent months, with about two-thirds of their forces having withdrawn to base camps outside Nicaragua. They insist the guerrillas haven't so much been driven from the battlefield by larger, better-armed Nicaraguan troops but rather that internal squabbling among various factions over how to unify their forces and come up with a common, appealing political platform has consumed the attention of their leaders.

The United States has been pressing for such unification, insisting that otherwise there is little chance of convincing disaffected elements of Nicaraguan society that they should be taken seriously.

"One thing is certain," a senior planner said. "If the Sandinistas stay united and the contras stay divided, the Sandinistas will win."

He noted that during the guerrilla campaign against Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza, Cuba made unification of various factions a precondition for military aid. The United States is pressing the contra leaders to come together if they want to achieve successful pressure on Nicaragua to negotiate a power-sharing arrangement.

The major factions are:

- The Nicaraguan Democratic Force, which says it has upward of 8,000 men under arms and operates from Honduras and northern Nicaragua.

- The Revolutionary Democratic Alliance, which claims to have about 2,500 fighters, operating from southern Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

- Two separate factions of Miskito Indians operating from Nicaragua's Caribbean coastal region.

"We're telling them they can't remain exclusive and still claim they're working for a democratic solution," one official said. "They have got to come up with a unified platform and leadership structure if they want to have any chance of succeeding."

He said some of the contras hope that eventually the United States will send in forces to bring down the Sandinistas and that in that situation they can act as mop-up forces. "We've got to convince them otherwise so they won't sit on their duffs," he said.